

OF BECOMING

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Abstract

This thesis will outline my material processes, ideas and concepts during my studies at York University's MFA in Visual Arts. I briefly discuss weaving and women in mythology and history, and connect my work to that of contemporary artists situated in the practice of weaving. I then describe my art-making process and discuss artists who also use methods based on destructive techniques and intuition. Finally, I discuss concepts that are pertinent within my art practice: archaeology, psychology, the emotional body, the uncanny, haunting and sticky auras.

To my mother—the thread that keeps me whole.

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How do we understand, connect with and react to traces of the metaphysical?¹

The metaphysical is the nonmaterial presence that guides my hands through the warp and weft. It is the emotional residue from certain objects and spaces that pervade my body, leaving intuition to steer my art practice. It is the residue that prefigures thoughts and feelings, and manifests into the atmosphere. It is the metamorphosis from animate to inanimate as a result of the passing of time.

(Notes from my journal)

Introduction

My work is about becoming, a process that encompasses both construction and deconstruction: energy goes into my materials and then there is the natural or simulated process of entropy. Transformation is central to my practice—a metamorphosis that reveals both ruin and beauty. Becoming applies to external things, to the body and to the psyche.

In my works, I examine the enduring presence of and fascination with the physical and metaphysical. Through the use of ruin, decay and transformation, I situate my works as metaphors for personal emotional histories. My works—which are inspired by ancient mythologies, metamorphosis, corporeality and the human condition—aim to manifest emotions through their manifold layers. I aim to create a space of awe and wonder where viewers discover an imaginary time, experience affect and contemplate their humanity. Like archaeological ruins, the works are unconcealed and exposed,

¹ I use the term “metaphysical” in a personal sense of transformation, emotion, myth and meaning imbued in the work.

revealing remnants that are haunted by traces of the mystery of life, death and the hereafter. My works aim to (re)present these remnants that prefigure thought and feeling.

In the Gallery: Weaving, Sound and Ceramics

Large-scale sisal rope weavings are suspended from the ceiling in a half-circular shape. They are heavy, ruinous walls—hand-dyed black, gray and shades of red—and bear the weight of gravity as they slump toward the floor. Partially unraveled, they descend with intensity. Holes are pierced through them. It is evident, perhaps, that time has weathered and decayed these woven structures, as their brute texture reveals splinters, roughness and erosion. Like a body, these weavings are visceral in their composition; they are comprised of fibrous veins—an interconnection of ropes—that make up its verticality. Biomorphic and organic in their construction, they remind us of who we are in regards to our mortal, impermanent bodies. Imbedded and hidden in the heavy weavings, are sounds of a cello and rocks dragging on the ground and against one another. The viewer enters the half-circular structure and can hear two different sounds coming from separate sides of the woven “walls”. From one wall, the sound of a cello, from the other, the sound of rocks. The sounds are not attempting to harmonize with one another, yet they both evoke a melancholic atmosphere. They are pure, raw and have not been edited. The bodily presence and ruinous quality of the work are congruous with the sounds emitted from it; the sounds are fragmented and fleeting. These permeable auditory elements bring to mind traces of the past: the rocks invoke rubble from ruins and the cello is haunting and emotional.

A series of thin, ethereal linen weavings hang from the ceiling. They are black and partially bleached, almost see-through and weightless. Black horsehair is woven into parts of the weavings, either blending in with the black linen or contrasting over the bleached segments. The weavings are hung vertically and sewn together, perhaps a gathering of shrouds.

Hung on the wall and sprawled out on the floor, several relic-like ceramics are intertwined with hand-dyed fiber. The materials juxtapose hard and soft surfaces, allowing rigidity and gravity to come into play. Situated near the ceramic works are small weavings that combine sisal, cheesecloth, horsehair, coyote fur, unspun wool, dye and rubber latex.

Women, Weaving and Mythology

“So by day she’d weave at her great and growing web—by night, by the light of torches set beside her, she would unravel all she’d done.” (Homer, *The Odyssey*)

Why are weaving metaphors everywhere—for example, “the fabric of society”, “to weave a story”—even though the act of weaving is now far from our everyday experience? Cloth was a mode of communication in ancient civilizations and has remained so within modern ones; likewise, it has played a key role in establishing social structures in many cultures. Textiles tell stories, hold memory and have history. Weaving can also be a form of cleverness and agency: In Homer’s *Odyssey*, Penelope weaves a death shroud for her husband’s father, Laertes. Since she did not know if her husband, Odysseus, had died on during his long return home, she came up with a stratagem to buy

herself time: she said she would marry one of her suitors once she had finished weaving the death shroud. However, remaining true to Odysseus, she unraveled her work at night. By weaving during the day and unweaving at night, she misleads the suitors yet persuades them to wait.

In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Philomela weaves a story of her rape, and Arachne challenges Minerva to a weaving contest. In Plato's *Republic*, the three Fates—Lachesis, Clothos and Atropos—are responsible for weaving one's birth, life and death. Weaving grants agency to mythological women by giving them a voice through their weaving practices. Most of these myths depict the suffering of women and how they use weaving to overcome their melancholy or oppression. These mythological narratives inspire my practice, and tie together my interest in women and weaving, in particular, that weaving has been a shared practice among women since ancient times. I am also interested in employing ancient weaving techniques, such as the soumak weave: a woven design that involves wrapping wefts over multiple warps before drawing them back under the last few warps. Using the soumak weave in my work connects me to previous generations, and connects the work to a sense of tradition and dignity.

Expanding on, but also blurring the boundaries of, traditional weaving, I have created a series of small-scale weaving studies using non-traditional materials such as horsehair, coyote fur, cheesecloth, steel, and sisal. I am learning through direct contact with the materials as I weave, wrap



Mary Grisey, *Remains of the Ephemeral II*, 2014, Hand-dyed cheesecloth, horsehair and rubber latex, 30" x 5"

or braid them, and sometimes pour rubber latex over the materials or soak them in dye. These studies are made without a loom, using only the simplest of tools: my hands. My work, *Remains of the Ephemeral II*, combines blonde and brown horsehair interwoven with hand-dyed cheesecloth. The cheesecloth was soaked in loose black tea, and, while it was still wet, I wove it through the two colors of horsehair and then poured rubber latex over parts of the cheesecloth. When the cheesecloth and rubber latex dried, they fused together and created a sort of membrane covering the horsehair. This fusion of materials suggested an intimate and primal state of being. Not only are the organic materials rudimentary, but so is my way of creating these weavings. The materials I employ in them often embed a memory within them. For instance, the horsehair came from something that was once alive. In this series of small weavings, I am fascinated with the visceral, tactility of the materials, as well as the crudeness of their appearance. The woven forms are reminiscent of our primordial, human nature and resemble familiar everyday objects, yet are somewhat unsettling.

Sheila Hicks is a contemporary weaver who works in a similar vein. Her fifty-year career has been characterized by a process of continual exploration in textiles. She has described her approach as “channels of investigation” and her makings as “unbiased weaves”. Hicks thinks of “weaves” as a noun and “unbiased” as a particular attitude that is free of prejudice.² These unbiased weaves that she created were aligned with minimal art in contemporary art-critical terms, but at the same time she allowed them to look as they are: as weavings. She was a pioneer in the sense that she used fiber as her medium without feeling the need to decide between fiber as a craft or fine art medium. She simply

² Simon, “Unbiased Weaves,” pp. 91-92.



Sheila Hicks, *Footprints (Rose)*, 1978,
Linen, cotton, 8" x 3 ½"

conjoined her “unbiased weaves” with concepts in a variety of sites and situations. She explored the structures of weaving for what they are: a repetition of verticals (the warp) interlaced with horizontals (the weft) that make up a whole structure. The writer Sarat Maharaj explains Hicks’ approach by saying: “an undecidable—as Derrida puts it, something that seems to belong to one genre but overshoots its border and seems no less at home in

another. Belongs to both, we might say, by not belonging to either”.³

In her work *Footprints (Rose)*, Hicks indiscriminately wove colored linen through cotton socks. The linen is in various flesh tones, and the socks are weathered and brownish. They seem haunted with memory, warmth and comfort. She has re-tended, and in a way, mended these old socks, transforming them into art. Her reclaimed everyday materials become treasures that are re-valued and seen anew.

(Un)Doing

“My work is impure; it is clogged with matter. I’m for a weighty, ponderous art. There is no escape from matter. There is no escape from the physical nor is there any escape from the mind. The two are on a constant collision course. You might say that my work is like an artistic disaster. It is a quiet catastrophe of mind and matter.” (Robert Smithson)

³ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 95.

My installations are similar to Smithson's "artistic disasters": they include bits of imperfect or unfinished warp and weft, and the inexact results of hand dyeing. These techniques amplify the indeterminate nature of my art practice. Traces of my hand are evident in the construction of the weavings and the subsequent deconstruction of its parts. My intention of revealing the layers and bringing through residual deterioration materializes when I unravel, scratch, and peel open parts of the work. The aesthetic destabilization and ruined quality of my installations is a vital component in the production and outcome of my work. Through this process of deconstructing, the sculptures transform into works of art.

I am currently furthering my destructive processes by exploring the effects of weathering and time and experimenting with transformative mediums. Transformative mediums include rubber latex, bleach, dye, and so on. Applying these fluid substances to solid materials alters their original properties, adding

fortuitous metamorphoses to the process. For instance, my work *Shrouds* consists of a series of process-based

linen and horsehair weavings. After completing the weavings, I submerged them into black dye. When they were dry, I bleached parts of them, improvising where the bleach would transform the black linen back to white. The late artist and Yale University professor Josef Albers once quizzed his students using a similar idea about the transformability of materiality: He asked, "What is the primary characteristic of a sheet of paper? Can folding or crimping the flat sheet give the paper new properties, new form?"



Mary Grisey, *Shrouds*, 2014, hand-dyed and bleached linen and horsehair, 8' x 4 ½' x 3'

Can we confound our preconceptions about the paperiness of paper?”⁴ These questions are similar to the questions I ask myself when I am in the studio. It is important to me that the materials I use have transformative qualities in themselves and that they have the ability to change when combined with each other. I am also interested in the transformations that occur as a result of the tension between control and chance; for example, when pouring rubber latex over cheesecloth, or bleach over black linen, I make decisions as to where I would like to pour the fluids, yet the result also has a life of its own. In addition to the use of fluid materials, I also incorporate found rusted-steel fragments into my weavings. I relate my process to drawing in the sense that I am making decisions as to where I would like my materials to overlap and combine. As in the tradition of drawing, I am exploring, observing and problem-solving, yet with non-traditional drawing materials.

Another example of my method of (de)construction is the work *For Lethe*. The title refers to the river of forgetfulness in the underworld, and the weaving itself is like a ruin that has been pulled up from the depths and unconcealed. As told in Virgil’s *Aeneid* before those in the underworld can reincarnate:

...God calls
these souls to Lethe in a long parade
to gain forgetfulness, then view the sky
once more, and wish to put on flesh again.⁵

This installation consists of a series of three woven panels hung from the ceiling in a semicircle, and the viewer experiences the work by walking inside and around it. By

⁴ Quoted in Faxon, “Twined Thoughts,” p. 51.

⁵ Book 6, lines 748-51.

suspending the work from the ceiling, it delineates space—from inside to outside—creating boundaries that define the environment. The inside of the empty space is filled by means of the imagination, where the body's spatiality interacts with the material surroundings. Architectural yet bodily, the monumental size of this work demands one's attention.



Mary Grisey, *For Lethe*, 2013, Hand-dyed sisal and rusted steel, 10' x 8' x 4'

I began constructing the work by hand-dyeing numerous rolls of sisal rope black, gray and burgundy. I then wove the ropes together to create a large woven structure. During this construction, I added rusted steel fragments into the warp, and also left the selvage ropes hanging down. In a traditional weaving, the selvage is hidden from view so that the finished cloth is uniform and tidy. If one looks at the back side of *For*

Lethe, there are no selvage ropes hanging and the structure looks quite consistent; however, the front side is ruinous. I am essentially weaving “inside-out” and using the opposite technique of a traditional weaving. The ropes are pulled tighter in some areas, and holes are left in the warp to interrupt the continuity, and on some parts of the weaving I have repeatedly unraveled or scratched the surface. Exploring non-traditional ways of weaving combined with the actions of unraveling, scratching and peeling open, points to my deconstructive method of working.



Diana Al-Hadid, *Spun of the Limits of My Lonely Waltz*, 2006, wood, polystyrene, plaster, fiberglass, paint, 72” x 64” x 64”

An artist who also uses similar processes of construction and then deconstruction is American artist, Diana Al-Hadid. Al-Hadid first builds up her sculptures and then breaks or peels away the surface. Her materials—usually wood, plaster, fiberglass, paint, metal—are often deconstructed by burning the surface, cutting into it or breaking it. Her interests—ancient mythological narratives to gothic and classical architecture—collide the past and the future, probability and improbability, gravity and weightlessness. The scale of our works are similar, yet they differ in the way that hers is mostly architectural,

while mine is bodily. Also, my way of constructing the work begins from the wall whereas Al-Hadid builds up from the floor. Although we use different materials, most of our practices intersect in terms of their processes and concepts, and the raw materiality underscored by an affective presence.

On Process, Urgency and Intuition

Situated in a fast-paced world with new technologies, I prefer a slower method of making art. I reject the modern notion of immediate satisfaction and embrace handmade work. I am attracted to work that takes longer to create and invest my time in process-oriented methods like weaving, clay-building and hand-dyeing. In my studio, I am surrounded by an array of source materials, mostly organic or found in nature and not limited to traditional artists' media: rope, fiber (cotton, linen or wool), dye, clay, rusted steel, wax, rubber latex. My intimate contact with these materials—smell and touch—is of great importance. Fiber is an affective medium due to the intimacy that exists in touching. Intimacy seems to exist between texture and emotion, and fiber is a thing that yearns to be touched. In Eve Sedgwick's *Touching Feeling*, she explains that the term “touchy-feely” has a double meaning—tactile plus emotional. She writes, “Fiber and Textures have particular value, relationally and somehow also ontologically.”⁶ Likewise, there is a seductive, visceral quality about the fiber materials I use in my works. In particular, the sisal ropes are alluring to gaze at, yet rough when touched. They are unyielding, prickly and unlikely to be swayed.

⁶ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, p. 24

During a studio visit with my external advisor, Spring Hurlbut, she asked me an important question that affected me deeply: “Where is your sense of urgency?” After the meeting, I asked myself again and again where that urgency and criticality is situated within my art practice. That question not only made me think about the primal forces of art making, but also made it clear to me that my most successful work happens through the spontaneous discovering and inventing of my materials and methods. I believe that intuition is the artist’s most valuable tool, and the urgency to unfold ideas from an uninhibited place guides me in understanding my art practice.

Propelled by an initial idea, I am then guided by chance and intuition. The spontaneous combining of materials also generates ideas for new works and concepts. I also become aware of my innate desire to use specific materials and to utilize them in certain ways. From such a starting point, my work usually unfolds into a series of weavings, sculptures or installations. Because I work best when I allow intuition and spontaneity, my strongest work arises when I am willing to embrace uncertainty. When I embark upon unknown territory, my work evolves throughout its construction and takes on a new shape of its own, therefore transforming any preconceived expectations.

Another artist who relies on intuition and urgency is Magdalena Abakanowicz. She places great importance on her painstakingly long process of weaving that is all done by hand and feels it is necessary to work with natural materials: hemp, horsehair, flax, wool, sisal. It is apparent that Abakanowicz is interested in a sensitivity that most organic things possess, but also a connection to traditional materials with a past. Most of her work is very tactile, visceral and intimate, and has the feeling of something very ancient and animalistic. In particular, her series of large-scale woven structures called *Abakans*,

depict monumental environments where the viewer can walk around the work and engage with the raw, irregular surfaces. Her *Abakans* are woven reliefs created on a loom, and then hung freely from ceiling to floor. She continues to work on the reliefs once they are taken off the loom in a sculptural manner, adding woven flaps or protrusions. Improvisation was very important during the creation of these *Abakans*, as she preferred not to use preliminary designs. She felt that planning could easily counteract the inherent possibilities of the material. Abakanowicz writes, “I feel successful each time I reject my own experience. I like neither rules nor prescriptions, these enemies of imagination. I make use of the technique of weaving by adapting it to my own ideas.”⁷



Magdalena Abakanowicz, *Black Environment*, 1970-78, fifteen sisal weavings on metal support, 300 x 80 x 80 cm



Magdalena Abakanowicz, *Baks*, 1976-80, burlap, resin, H. 61-69 cm, Depth 50-56 cm, W. 55-66 cm

⁷ Abakanowicz, *Magdalena Abakanowicz*, p. 48.

Reducing the scale of her work, Abakanowicz created a series *Alterations* that consists of cast fragmented body parts. In this series, she made fibrous sculptures called *Backs*, which were made from multiple plaster casts of a broad-shouldered man. She then made a positive cast from burlap sacking—smearing wax, synthetic resin and then dipping it in glue so the work would harden like a shell. These casts—leaning forward with curved shoulders—are placed on the floor in rows in a gallery or outdoors amongst the earth. It seems as though the surface textures of these bodies are that of nature left to its own devices—worn, wrinkly and rough. Like my work *For Lethe*, these casts are hollowed-out, suggesting a bodily gravity toward earth. *Backs* also define space through their multiplicity and visceral, yet quite architectural shells.

From First Year to Second Year

During my first year at York University, I was casting various parts of my body with plaster bandages and wax and then sewing the parts together to create fragmented body forms. I hand-sewed a large pile of individual sacks made from muslin fabric and rubber latex and then positioned the body into the sacks surrounded by a pile of dirt. In this installation titled *Return to Earth* I explored the idea of death being a natural process of life and a spiritual phenomenon, and examined the metamorphosis of the body through the melting and decaying of my materials. I was particularly interested in the body's



Mary Grisey, *Return to Earth*, 2013, plaster, muslin, beeswax, charcoal, dirt, rubber latex, 10' x 8' x 3'

transition from life to death both as a biological process, a spiritual process and as a metaphor for metamorphosis.

As I transitioned from first year to second year, I felt a need to start weaving. Inspired by my undergraduate studies in Fiber and Material at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, I wanted to revisit working with fiber. I missed the meditative pulling of the weft through the warp and the satisfying textures of the fiber running through my hands. Since I did not have access to weaving equipment at York, I created my own large-scale loom by hammering nails into the wall and then winding sisal rope around the nails to use as a warp. My previous knowledge of weaving on a traditional floor loom, along with the inability to access a tapestry loom, has pushed me to approach weaving like a drawing. This approach has given me more freedom in my woven shapes and the ability to make a wall loom in any space, of any size. When I complete a weaving on the wall, I usually exhibit it suspended from the ceiling. This gives the weaving a whole new function, as it no longer exists on a two-dimensional plane and becomes more site-specific. The work becomes visceral, body-like and heavy, and the viewer is able to walk around it and experience the structure like architecture.



Mary Grisey, *Relic of the Moirai*, 2013, hand-dyed cotton, wool and sisal, 10' x 8'

For the 2013 Art Spin Exhibition, I created a site-specific woven structure that was installed at the Tower Automotive Warehouse in Toronto: a vacant, derelict warehouse that was abandoned years ago. I decided to suspend my weaving from two rusted steel bars in front of a green door with Cyrillic text on it. I was drawn to the installation potential of the steel bars and even more so to the otherworldly black spray-painted text on the green door. Hanging this weaving site-specifically generated a dialogue with the existing architecture and provoked an interesting tension between the geometric shape of the door and the organic form of the weaving. It is the tension and harmony that results from the ways in which my materials interact with the surrounding space that interests me. Creating work site-specifically in response to a space and the demanding labor it takes to create the work is important in my art practice.

Archaeology, Psychoanalysis and Weaving⁸

My art practice is influenced by my interest in fragments and traces of the past and the way that only time endures. Ancient remains become non-places, and the debris of an arch, column or temple shows how ephemeral life is. The poetics of these ruins prove that time is fleeting, I am human, everything passes, but the world remains. Through mossy rubble and hidden shards, we can find a new beauty in this decay; what was new and pristine yesterday is now haunting and mysterious. Part of looking forward is to look in the opposite direction—backward. Archaeology is also often used as a

⁸ This is my interpretation in relation to my working process and is not intended to be an in-depth analysis. I am using these terms as a metaphor for excavating meaning and memories.

metaphor for “digging up” the depths of the human mind. It is this psychological unearthing that I am searching for in my work.

Archaeology and psychoanalysis are connected in their methodologies and concepts. In Freud’s “Constructions in Analysis,” he writes that the analyst’s “work of construction, or, if it is preferred, of reconstruction, resembles to a great extent an archaeologist’s excavation of some dwelling-place that has been destroyed and buried or of some ancient edifice. The two processes are in fact identical, except that the analyst works under better conditions and has more material at his command to assist him, since what he is dealing with is not something destroyed but something that is still alive.”⁹

When I create work, I feel that I act as both an archaeologist and an analyst because I am dealing with constructing, deconstructing and then reconstructing a bodily form—physically and mentally. Freud explains that the excavator is dealing with salvaging objects that have been destroyed by fire, mechanical violence and plundering from the past, whereas the analyst is dealing with recovering psychic objects from an individual’s early history. The archaeologist has the task of reconstructing tangible objects—a column, a mural or painting found in debris, which usually is the aim and end of their endeavors. The analyst has the task of reconstructing psychical objects, which is only their preliminary labor.¹⁰ In a similar manner, I have been contemplating and comparing my woven structures to that of the human body, and imagining that through constructing the “body” of the weaving, I am uncovering ancient remains as well as fragments of memories and traumas. I become the excavator through the act of physically unraveling the threads of the woven surface and then the analyst by uncovering psychical

⁹ Lewkowicz, *On Freud’s “Constructions in Analysis,”* p. 11.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

information from what the woven form is visually communicating. For instance, when I unravel a few threads, cut into or scratch the surface of the work, it often starts to resemble a certain bodily gesture or affect. These gestures could be somatic responses, such as heavily slumping downward or aggressively being pulled in one direction—gestures which may be perceived as melancholy or confrontational. Since I believe that intuition is the artist’s most valuable tool, this process of “excavating” and then “analyzing” the finished work becomes an invaluable part of my practice.

The Emotional Body

My woven structures are hung in a way that evokes one’s somatic response to holding emotions within the body. Emotions can be manifested through the body’s gestures, postures and expressions. The emotional postures of my works suggest that they harbor some past which makes them look in such a way. In *The Body Remembers*, Babette Rothschild writes, “Emotions, though interpreted and named by the mind, are integrally an experience of the body. Each emotion looks different to the observer and has a different bodily expression. Every emotion is characterized by a discrete pattern of skeletal muscle contraction visible on the face and in body posture.”¹¹ Rothschild also explains that emotional traumas can be expressed through flashbacks, a re-experiencing of a traumatic event in part or its entirety. She explains further that traumatic flashbacks are sensory experiences that can be triggered by interoceptive cues, which respond to stimuli emanating from inside the body. These interoceptive cues, or proprioceptors, have

¹¹ Rothschild, *The Body Remembers*, p. 56.

to do with stimuli perceived within the body such as heart rate, respiration, internal temperature, muscular and visceral tension.

The artist Berlinde de Bruckere successfully captures the body's emotional postures and gestures through her casts of trees, horses and human bodies. Using several layers of wax, she casts these bodies to resemble flesh and to preserve their forms. Her sculptures ooze emotion as the surface or "skin" contains marks and scars, and the figures are often headless and disfigured. Her bodies convey movement: they are hung, draped over a table or crouching down. In this movement, their gestures seem to exhibit a sense of vulnerability and

precariousness. Her work *Inside Me II* is an entangled mass of flesh-colored intestines made from casts of tree branches covered in wax and epoxy. The piece demonstrates the idea of Rothschild's interoceptive



Berlinde de Bruckere, *Inside Me II*, 2011, wax, epoxy, wood, rope, cloth, wool, iron, 82 x 225 x 88 cm/ 32 1/4 x 88 5/8 x 34 5/8 in

stimuli; as De Bruckere herself says about the work: "We do not have control over our insides."¹² She situated the waxy intestines on worn cushions suspended on an old-looking wooden frame intended for drying herbs. The ropes used to suspend the intestines and cushions demonstrate a kind of fragility; the ropes look so thin and weathered and are working so hard to hold up this heavy load. At the same time, there is a sense of warmth and comfort, as the intestines seem protected and preserved by the cushions. It makes me

¹² De Bruckere, *We Are All Flesh* (interview).

think of what makes us human, and the sheer vulnerability of a body turned inside out for the viewer to see. The disorder of the intestines points to chaos and uncertainty. The intestines portray a tangible state of human emotion by way of showing us that we all share a commonality—we are all flesh.

The exploration of how to depict the emotional body is a continual drive in my practice. I am fascinated with the psychological aspect of the body and its emotional link to the liminality of inside and outside, something that is aesthetically desirable, yet questionable. In my work, I have always been particularly drawn to depicting the emotional body, whether lifeless or alive, and re-embodying the figure as a fibrous body instead of a fixed identity. My use of organic materials suggests our underlying humanity and our existential connection to the natural world and the fact that we are confronted with all that is human.



Mary Grisey, *Cradling: In Ruins*, 2014, found barn wood, hand-dyed sisal and burned sisal, 6' x 5' x 4'

The Uncanny

My small-scale works—ceramics and weaving studies—have an uncanny feeling to them. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, one of the meanings of uncanny is: “Partaking of a supernatural character; mysterious, weird, uncomfortably strange or unfamiliar.” Yet as Freud points out the uncanny is also in some way related to the familiar.¹³ My works have this quality of being both familiar and unfamiliar. Their forms and materials suggest that they are evocative of an existing object or being, yet there is uncertainty as to what it exactly is or functions as. Thus these works seem to be unsettling or mysterious. In Freud’s *The Uncanny*, he describes an account of a series of repetitious circumstances. One hot summer afternoon he walked around the streets of a small town in Italy and by chance ended up in an unfamiliar district, which happened to be the red light district. Feeling uncomfortable, he hurried away; however, he eventually found himself back in the same street. Again he hurried away, yet again he ended up in the same street. Freud described himself as being “seized” by a feeling that he could only describe as the uncanny after his many failed attempts to escape this same street. Freud’s description of the uncanny from his unintentional return is similar to the sense the viewer gets when they are encountering my work. The viewer



Mary Grisey, *Remains of the Ephemeral III*, 2014, hand-dyed unspun wool and horsehair, 22” x 6”

¹³ Freud, *The Uncanny*, p. 134.

may experience déjà vu during their encounter with the work and questions if they have seen it before somewhere else. For example, my work *What Remains of the Ephemeral III* is perhaps reminiscent of a domestic tool, like a broom, yet it is unsettling in the way that the horsehair and unspun wool are corporeal and visceral. At first glance, one may understand what the work is, but by the second glance, they are questioning their original assumptions.

Haunting and Sticky Auras

“If everything dies and then changes, then what is really true?” (Sogyal Rinpoche, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*)

There are questions that cannot fully be answered concerning the mystery of life and death. Is there something that survives death? How do I address the ephemerality of life? The ruins in my work point to my interest in the limits of the physical and my preoccupation with the metaphysical. My woven installation *What Remains of the Ephemeral?* was installed outdoors during the winter, allowing the elements to affect the work. The snow slowly built up, devouring the bottom of the woven structure, and also settled on top of the chain that held the weaving up. The chain began to rust and the dye began to run as the weather warmed up and the rain fell. The work shows how nature and time transform the physical. Also, the need to install my work amidst uncontrollable conditions such as weather is a way for my work to incorporate the chances of nature.

One could say that my woven installations are haunted spaces where emotional manifestations exist. What makes the work haunted is the mystery and emotional

atmosphere that seems to linger: Was it through deliberate acts of destruction or natural disaster that these works have deteriorated? Or was it through the course of time? My work—both woven and ceramic—seems to teeter between the animate and inanimate. There is a play of presence and absence, of being and not being. In Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, he writes: "Let us call it a *hauntology*. This logic of haunting would not be merely larger and more powerful than an ontology or a thinking of Being (of the 'to be,' assuming that it is a matter of Being in the 'to be or not to be,' but nothing is less certain)."¹⁴ Derrida's use of *hauntology* is pertinent to the in-between state of my work. My installations blur the distinction between being and not-being, as they exist as traces of imaginary ruins in a state of partial or complete disrepair.

It can be said that an aura, or a distinct atmosphere, emanates from certain objects and spaces with a nonmaterial presence or emotional residue. It is possible that an aura of emotional residue encircles my work. One cannot exactly understand the way one feels when under the influence of an aura. It is the residue that prefigures thoughts and feelings that is generated from the aura and transmitted from object to viewer. It is not visible, but it is felt. I am interested in the idea that an aura can be attached to objects and spaces, and propose a term for this idea: "sticky aura". Sticky aura is derived from Sara Ahmed—a feminist theorist—in her book *Happy Objects*. I use her idea of how happiness directs us toward certain objects and that they can accumulate a positive affective value that can be thought of as "sticky". She writes, "Affect is what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values and objects."¹⁵ By combining the idea of something being "sticky" to the idea of an "aura", I came up with "sticky aura": a mysterious aura

¹⁴ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 10.

¹⁵ Ahmed, *Happy Objects*, p. 29

that sticks to an object or space, emanating a sensation that is pre-personal and metaphysical. The affective presence of sticky auras could be seen as akin to the hauntology mentioned above.

My large woven structures—especially my work *Shrouds*—can be thought of as a source of protection or covering, similar to a blanket or shroud. This shroud could contain a sticky aura, transmitting emotive sensations to the viewer. Like a blanket, a shroud usually refers to an item, such as a cloth, that covers or protects some other object, most often used for wrapping a deceased person for their burial. Cynthia Ozick’s *The Shawl* is a short story about Rosa, a mother trying to survive the horrors of a Nazi concentration camp, who hides her baby girl, Magda, in a tattered shawl. Stella, Rosa’s teenage niece, steals Magda’s shawl to warm herself which subsequently leads to Magda’s untimely death. Without the shawl to hide Magda, a guard snatches her and throws her against an electrical fence. When Rosa witnesses the guard throw Magda into the fence, she grabs the shawl to silence her cries. Rosa, the narrator, tells us: “if she let the wolf’s screech ascending now through the ladder of her skeleton break out, they would shoot; so she took Magda’s shawl and filled her own mouth with it, stuffed it in and stuffed it in, until she was swallowing up the wolf’s screech and tasting the cinnamon and almond depth of Magda’s saliva.”¹⁶ Magda’s shawl acts as a blanket, but it could also be a symbolic death shroud. Rosa claims it is a “magic shawl”, as it protects Magda from the cold and starvation, but also ultimately saves Rosa at the end of the story by silencing her cries. Rosa keeps the shawl with her for the rest of her life because it has become imbued with a sticky aura of meanings and emotions.

¹⁶ Ozick, *The Shawl*, p.10.

Final Remarks

Having taken this virtual tour of my thesis exhibition, we can see that the underlying theme of my work is that of *becoming*. I described my art-making process as relying on process, intuition and urgency and discussed the inspirations and concepts that are pertinent within my art practice: myth, the uncanny, hauntology and affect. I connected my work to that of contemporary artists situated in the practice of weaving (Sheila Hicks and Magdalena Abakanowicz) and also methods based on destructive techniques (Diana Al-Hadid). It is the process of becoming—of doing and undoing—that guides my work: the resulting ruinous sculptures of fibrous matter embody ambiguous metamorphoses and affective hauntings. Confronted by the material presence and immaterial emotions of these installations, the viewer is placed in the role of uncovering traces of half-remembered pasts and uncanny futures.

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